The Voice From The Cross

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The Voice From the Cross

Passiontide Sermons

by

R. NEUMANN

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The First Word

THE FIRST WORD FROM THE CROSS

"Father, forgive them, for they know not, what they do." Luke 23:34.

There is a flower most wonderful. In the depth of its chalice there is afforded to the eye the sight of a cross, a crown of thorns, nails, and the prints of wounds. Passiflora, i. e., passion-flower, this prodigy of nature is called. Says the sainted Frommel: "From that hour in which Jesus, the true passion-flower, bowed His head, the multiformed passion-flower, his followers, climbs up the cross of Golgotha. Not every one grows to the full height; yet what bliss if it but blooms at His feet!"

The passiflora of our Lenten Hymns, the hymns of cross and comfort, the use of which has ever and again refreshed the congregation of cross-bearers, has grown to be a sweet fruit of His sufferings. None other than the Christ, the Crucified One, stands out as the central figure in all these hymns. With humble devotion we listen from year to year to His last Words from the Cross. To this day they are fraught with messages divine.

As a melody from heaven itself, they vibrate

in the air and bring to our ears the notes of the first word:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

1. They denote Christ's mercy.
2. May they evoke our mercy.

I.

The sin of crucifying Jesus must not be charged against the soldiers. Soldiers are bound by oath to obey orders. Yet they mocked the sufferer, and the rulers joined in their mockery. Says a well-known expositor of the Passion-Story: "What happened there on Calvary to and by spectators of the crucifixion of the Saviour still occurs every day. The work-righteous Pharisees, in alliance with the heathen who live without God, crucify the Holy One of God and shower upon Him mockery and scorn."

The severer Christ's sufferings amid their derision, the more painful the sting of their mockery, while the weight of our sin was laid upon Him, the more deserving of adoration His love which endured all of this in our behalf. The very scoffers

among those passing the Cross were unconsciously made to speak the truth in their intended mockery: "Thou art the Christ, the Chosen One of God." For thus it is written in the Twenty-second Psalm: "I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people; all they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head."

How violently man flies into passion when scorned! Bitterly he often curses his scoffer. But Jesus had only words of love for His scoffers, and even made intercession for them: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He judges leniently, sparingly. They, indeed, knew not Whom they were blaspheming and torturing.

Rightly Jesus could say concerning Himself: "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." This meekness He revealed in His association with friend and enemy. With forbearance, with ever new and untiring patience, He bore their frailties; the breath of peace wafts through all His words. Even where, in exalted and holy earnestness, His speech strikes at hypocrisy, unmasking it, we distinguish the never-failing motive of love which

would rather save than condemn. For the revolting assault of the officer of the high council He had but this meek reply: "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?" For the disciple who thrice denied Him, He has not even a word of rebuke; merely a glance filled with unspeakable pain, which cut deeply into the soul of the recreant. Upon His betrayer He confers no reproach; a sad plaint only comes from His lips: "Judas, betrayest thou the Son of Man with a kiss?"

This unlimited meekness is the manifestation and exemplification of an infinite love which like an overflowing stream emanates from His divine heart, pouring its beneficent, fructifying waters over all, pardoning, blessing, elevating, saving. Compassion for the people seizes Him; He pities the souls of those perturbed on account of their sins. To the woman caught in adultery, He says, "Go thy way and sin no more." To the sinner, who at the supper in the house of Simon, casts herself prostrate at His feet, He promises pardon because she loved much. For Jerusalem, which had rejected Him, He has in His tender mercy but tears of pity. While

His disciples call down the vengeance of heaven, He plaintively cries out: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather thy children as a hen gathereth her chicks."

Ah, yes: there is no misery so abject but He comes to it as a helper; no depravity so wretched but His eye still regards it with loving forebearance; no crime so horrible—His Crucifixion was judicial murder without parallel—but He has a word of apology for it. He endured as none other; yet He also conquered as none other.

Whence this love? Whence this endurance? The only answer is: He is more than a man; His soul abides in a continuous hidden communion with God. This majesty of manifestation in the midst of deepest humiliation, this being exalted above all temporal relations, desires, efforts, and yet this genuinely human compassion with all that joyfully or painfully agitates a human heart, this ready courage of sacrifice amidst the tortures of the cross, this inmost consciousness of victory, when apparently He is conquered, this zeal for the Father's honor, this indulgence toward all the frailties in His disciples, this patient surrender into the hands of His

enemies—all this proves the serene harmony of His inner life.

In Jesus we behold the ideal man. He is the Son of man and the Son of God; He is all in all. Out of the depth of His lowliness, out of the night of His Passion, there rises the clear lustre of an unnameable greatness and majesty as it appears in no other man. No human thought in its most audacious flight could conceive of it, so great, so heavenly in life; greater still and more divine in death. These gracious revelations in Jesus, what are they but the visible image of the Father, the reflection of the Father's eternal Majesty.

Today, after centuries have gone by, we realize the immense guilt which the Jewish nation incurred in the crucifixion, causing the greatest drama in history to be enacted with a catastrophe most tremendous. In other dramas produced by poetic genius the hero who outwardly succumbs atones for his share of human weakness with his death, and, succumbing, he receives the victor's crown. How different the case in Jesus' Death! Here all the guilt, rudeness, glowing hatred lies on the shoulders of the people and its leaders; all

innocence, on the other hand, all heavenly kindness, all reconciliation, all calm and submissive patience on the side of Christ.

And He, the very sinless One, in the midst of His death-pangs, pleads that His enemies be forgiven. His intercession applies to the heathen soldiers who are blind tools in the hands of their superiors. It is offered in behalf of the fickle mass, so easily led, so wavering, as we witness so often in the course of this world's history. "But does it embrace the fervent hatred of a false faith of priests and scribes, whose hypocrisy is uncovered?" There surely is here a vast difference, and He alone, who sees in secret, who knows the false ideas and vagueness of the human spirit, knows whether and under what conditions sin can still be forgiven. He knows whether we act against better convictions, against our conscience. Yet most assuredly Jesus has prayed also that we might have forgiveness. We, too, are sorely in need of it.

II.

Even though we persecute Him no more, blaspheme and scoff Him no more, we pass His cross in the spirit of indifference. Among those, too, who

know the Lord quite well and who attend these Lenten services quite faithfully, there are some who do not purpose to follow Him on the path of the cross to grow like Him in enduring, forgiving love. How little tolerance in matters of religion! The Roman church with her head at Rome still denies our right of existence. She calls herself the only saving church which Luther left, a heretic. If she still wielded the power which was hers during the middle ages, she would produce the rusty tools of torture, and erect the pyre upon which a Huss and other martyrs of the faith were burned. And in Protestant circles there are not missing the fanatical sects which have gone out from among us in order to worship according to their man-made beliefs. Of the intercessory power of the Christ and of justification by faith they know but little. They derogate the Lutheran faith as obsolete, since it manifests itself differently from their own.

The basic element of the First Word from the Cross is a trait unknown to the Old Testament: Love toward the enemy. This love Christ has pointedly enjoined His own to practice: "Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, bless

them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you, and ye shall be sons of the Most High." According to this standard a Christian life conditions a heart ready to forgive. Those who offend us we are not to regard as enemies, but as erring, stumbling sisters and brothers. We are to pray for them even more fervently than for our friends, since they need it most.

The equilibrium of a godly heart consists in peace with God and man. If deprived at times of this inner rest by the world or their sinful inclinations, Christians long for it, and avail themselves of every opportunity of regaining it. They are like the Heavenly Father, of whom we know that He loves to forgive. Implacability is a decided hindrance to salvation. If a hard-hearted, stubborn individual approaches the Lord's Table, let him remember that the apostle declares all those unworthy who come with contempt in their souls for their neighbor and with an unreconciled mind. Paul tells them that they are guilty of the body and blood of their Lord; that they eat and drink judgment to themselves. Let such an one, desiring to appropriate the comfort of his Saviour, of His cross and death,

understand that Christ on the Cross prayed for His enemies, and stretched out his arms to draw all men to Himself in order to unite them in a lasting brotherhood.

Much contention and enmity result from the idea of people that others ought to endure almost any kind of treatment from them, while they themselves are super-sensitive and resentful. Or they lightly assume that what they say and do to hurt others is of small consequence, even while they interpret as harshness and serious offence what others do in retaliation. Alas! how often do those who stand in the way of our spiritual advancement give up to the spell of passion, and so do not realize how much harm they are doing. Like our Saviour, we must try to discern between such deluded people and those who sin knowingly against better convictions and the dictates of their consciences.

For good reasons the fifth petition is embodied in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." If we believe that God has forgiven us as soon as in all humility we have prayed for His pardon, feel released from our burden of guilt, and are recon-

ciled to our Father in Heaven, then at once our hearts, filled with delight, will beat in love for the brother who in some way has sinned against us. With a ready mind we will proffer the hand of reconciliation. A church father offers excellent advice to the Christian who is roused to anger, namely, not to do anything until he has prayed the Lord's Prayer. It will prove profitable in such a frame of mind to remember the love, forbearance, and loving kindness of God, to turn to the Crucified One, and mark His great patience in the face of the malice and mockery of His enemies, and how He prayed for them. Then our anger will cool down. Our hatred will vanish as a cloud before the sun.

As long as we live on earth, let us be mindful of the forgiving love of our Saviour, of His First Word from the Cross, of His intercession for His enemies, in order in our last hour to enjoy the comfort of having followed Him to the Cross. Amen.

The Second Word

THE SECOND WORD FROM THE CROSS

And one of the malefactors that were hanged railed on him saying, Art not thou the Christ? save thyself and us. But the other answered, and, rebuking him said, Dost thou not even fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said, Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom. And He said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise. Luke 23:39-43.

An unapproachable, refractory and callous murderer in the death-call was brought to Christ by a saintly pastor, when this servant of God, in the course of a conversation, remarked: "O what manner of Love on the part of God that for sinners such as *we* are He gave His only begotten Son!" This humble *we* melted the ice in an obdurate heart. The difference between the malefactor on the cross and ourselves is not as great, of a truth, as we are inclined to imagine. Our sins, too, are great and grievous, so that on account of them we had de-

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served death and condemnation a thousand times. In this also we resemble the malefactor that we must die on our cross; for our sickness, cares and sins, our misfortune, our agony of soul and fear of death eat at our life and at length break our heart. On this cross we must die. There is none to free us from this lot. "We receive the due reward of our deeds." Let us not, therefore, mince matters by excusing ourselves. God knows all that implicates us at His judgment-seat. On Calvary rather let us make our confession, and with the malefactor at the right hand of Christ implore the Saviour's mercy.

The Second Word of Christ from the Cross contains:

1. A confession.
2. An absolution.

I.

To me the gravest evil of the times seems to be the fact that mankind has lost its sense of guilt. In our churches the disregard and neglect of the communion table is the evidence. The serious pastor strives to intensify the consciences of his hearers, to

awaken minds for an appreciation of spritual values. The young can hardly await the time when they outgrow the restraint of their elders. To be "of age" seems to be the realization of a thousand vain dreams. Freedom realized, they readily lend their ear to the tempter, and choose the slippery path of vice, often never to retrace their steps. At times the conscience wakens. But quickly and easily the silent monitor is put to sleep. And why? They hear from the lips of the glib scoffer, and they read it in worthless books: "There is no God, no judge, no conscience, no eternal retribution."

Others upon whose brow vice has not impressed its stamp, who, by good parents or a kind Providence, have been kept from falling, pityingly contemn the malefactor and the publican who plead for mercy. They thank God that they are not like other people, murderers, thieves, wastrels. They glory in their goodness and purity and honesty. They are convinced that they are on the way to life eternal, that the goal, the heavenly calling of God through Christ, has long since been assured them.

And yet, they are still afar off, and deeply in-

debted to God. Examine yourself, my friend, whether God can be pleased with you, and whether your own excellency be the assurance of it. Unless you have grown to be an out-and-out Pharisee, you will not have this assurance. One only can save you, even Jesus Christ, the Saviour of sinners, to whom the thief at the right made the appeal at the last hour. Chrysostom at one time preached a strong sermon on the malefactor on Golgotha's Hill. In it we read:

"Satan drove Adam out of Paradise, Jesus brought in the thief. Yet behold the difference! That evil one drove out man bearing the mark of but one stain, disobedience; Christ, however, takes with Himself the malefactor purged from sin, although innumerable stains of iniquity had polluted him."

In the light radiating from the cross the malefactor made the whole way of salvation in this one hour of grace. Fear of God, conviction, confession of sin, the prayer for mercy at the hand of the King of the Kingdom of Grace and Glory, the witness-zeal of love for the truth, as the "fruits worthy of repentance"—all this was granted this

lost sheep of Israel, who in the eleventh hour heard the voice of his Shepherd. Not everybody is afforded such a season of grace at last, while thinking that he could defer his conversion; and yet this penitent and pardoned thief is an instrument of comfort to every one whose eyes were opened with regard to his sinful estate and who still finds courage sufficient to believe that access to grace is still open.

Let us consider next how this malefactor comes to experience Divine Grace. While Pharisee and scribe in scornful reproach vent their hatred against Jesus, viz., that He had claimed the ability of destroying the temple and building it again in three days, and mockingly hail him, "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross," the malefactor on the left joins them in deriding Jesus saying, "If Thou be the Christ, help Thyself and us." This abuse confirms and perfects the impression made upon the other malefactor with regard to Christ's real character. He turns advocate of Jesus. He defends Him against mockery and scorn. Chiding his guilty partner in crime, he warningly addresses him, "Dost thou not even fear God, seeing

thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly: for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss."

If the *severity of the punishment* is to explain the penitence of the malefactor at the right hand of Jesus, how are we to interpret the impenitence of the other? How did the torch of faith come to be kindled in the heart of the contrite one? Was it the involuntary admission of his enemies, "He helped others?" Was it the patience of the meek, suffering Christ? Was it His first word from the cross? Was it a glimpse of His compassionate look that attracted his attention?

Be that as it may, in the right moment he seizes the life-saver thrown out to him as to a drowning man. As he retraces his path of sin with that last court-trial as a fitting finale; as full consciousness of his guilt dawns on his mind, for the first time perhaps a ray of hope bursts into his grief-stricken heart that all is not lost. As a grain of mustard seed, his faith germinates, quickly to shoot up. Ere the gates of hell open to receive him, ere the last shadows out of his dark past rise up gigantically,

he turns to that radiant form of the dying Saviour. After an unreserved confession of his sins, he makes that wonderful appeal, "Lord, remember me, when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom." At the very time when the whole world rejects Jesus, when Gentiles crucify Him, when the Jews triumph over His destruction, when His disciples take offence at Him, Peter denies Him, Judas betrayes Him—a criminal owns Him, calls upon Him in his agony of death as the Lord who enters into His Kingdom!

The malefactor's confession accords with our needs. Let us not in pharisaic self-righteousness turn aside from the sinner with disgust. Let us beware of all inclination to esteem ourselves higher by enumerating his whole record of crimes. Let us rather take the seat of the defendant and realize that if, God were to cast us out, to condemn us, we would receive only our due reward. How do we know whether we would have ended differently from that robber on the cross had *we* grown up in sin, sunk in the mire of depravity, abandoned to the enticements of this world? Would to God that all of us were as sincere in our confession of sin, as was this malefactor.

II.

We would then, too, receive absolution, and be assured of the grace of God. It is, indeed, the blessed fruit of the sufferings of Christ that now the vilest of sinners need not be lost on account of his sins. Let him humble himself before God and plead the mercy of Christ and he shall be saved.

Even though this penitent evil-doer come from the scum of humanity, even though he is a criminal to whom well-deserved punishment is meted out—a cursed one who cannot undo his evil deeds—the Lord Jesus absolves him. He turns his thorn-crowned head toward him saying, "Verily, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

Mind you, *today*. No purgatory awaits the penitent sinner, no selfcastigation; no torment of hell, until, purged from the dross of sin, he is permitted to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. On the very day of his death he will enter into eternal joy.

Today! In our dismal age in which the death of Jesus is no longer taken as the point of conciliation for all the scattered children of God, do not many people jealously hear this promise to the malefactor? Today! As the migratory bird at the first

call of spring, tests his wings, is not many a soul drawn homeward today? Would not many an one, oppressed by the sorrows and burdens of years today gladly exchange this earth for heaven? And such as have led the malefactor's life, though they have escaped earthly justice, who have carelessly staggered through life, as if there were no limit to this earthly life?

"Today," God hails them, "today if ye hear My voice, harden not your hearts." Shall we depend on the morrow? Shall we follow the example of Felix to whom Paul preached of righteousness and self-control and judgment and say, "When I have a convenient time I will call Thee unto me?" What if the angel of death should summon us, "this night thy soul shall be taken from thee?" Who will continue to live in hopes that grace offered and rejected repeatedly will be available in the hour of death?

It was the same messenger of King Pharaoh who one day knocked at the prison-cell of both the butler and the baker. It was the same day on which once more they beheld the beautiful sunlight. Yet while the butler was re-instated in his office, the baker walked to the gallows. It was the same hill on

which stood the two crosses of the malefactors. In the same soil their bodies were laid to rest. Yet one awakened in paradise, the other in hell. In like manner our eyes will break. The same grave-yard will likely receive our bones. But after death—judgment, the decision, when each one of us will receive as he has done in the body, whether it be good or evil. If perchance you can live serenely without the assurance of the good pleasure of God, I tell you, you will not die in peace. While you are living, it will never be too late for your repentance.

This is the blessed solace which flows from the Cross of Christ in the second word uttered in His agony.

On the other hand, O word of horror! "It is too late!" See that father hastening from his burning home? One of his beloved ones is reported as missing. He rushes back. But it is too late. Who is that lone wanderer hurrying along the road through the darkness of night? In the depth of his heart he harbors but one desire: He wants to reach his old home. It is the prodigal son, his heart burning for a word of forgiveness from the lips of a dying

mother. Now he catches a glimpse of light. It is the home of his childhood. He opens the door; he rushes in. "Too late!" This is the message he reads in the tearful eyes of brother and sister. His mother's lips are silent forever.

For a long, long time the gates of heaven have stood ajar. The Saviour has called. Once closed ere you have entered, they will never open for you again. It will be too late! Sinner, while still you roam this side of the grave, it is never too late. Still you may hear the voice of God. Still you may in the spirit climb the hill of Golgotha. Still you may implore your Saviour, "Lord, remember me!" The grace bestowed upon the malefactor may be yours too. Blessed is the man to whom the assurance is given, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise." Amen.

The Third Word

THE THIRD WORD FROM THE CROSS

When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by whom He loved, he saith unto His mother, Woman, behold, thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold, thy mother. John 19: 26 and 27.

Among the surging crowd of people surrounding the cross, there were a few souls who loved Jesus: The women who followed Him out of Galilee and ministered to Him out of their substance. "There were standing," thus we read in the twenty-fifth verse of the nineteenth chapter of John, "by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene." Their love was so strong that it was not to be quenched by mockery and shame. To the last breath they purposed to hold out with their Lord. They felt as sings Paul Gerhardt:

O do not Lord deride me,
I will not hence depart,
Here will I stand beside Thee,
When breaks Thine anguished heart:
When on Thy breast is sinking
In death's last fatal grasp
Thy head, e'en then unshrinking
Thee in my arms I'll clasp.

Hear then—

The Legacy of the Son to the Mother

1. Woman, behold thy son.
2. Son, behold thy mother.

I.

A picture that stirs the heart: The mother standing by the cross of the Son! The nails which pierced the hands and feet of the Lord, likewise pierced the heart of the mother. She sees him suspended on the cross, the blood streaming from His wounds, and yet she is unable to help Him, to bind up His wounds, to allay his sufferings. Nameless pain! A mother sees her child struggling in torture, and—is helpless. Who can realize the agony of Mary? There is fulfilled in her experience at this moment the prophecy of old Simeon, "A sword shall pierce through Thine own soul."

How lovingly had she tended and fondled Him as a babe in Bethlehem! She had not shunned the difficult journey to Egypt in order to shield Him from the wiles of Herod. When afterwards, on returning from Jerusalem, she had lost Him, a twelve year old lad, and after prolonged search had

found Him, deepest anxiety is expressed in her address, "Son, why has Thou thus dealt with us?" When referring to His filial relation to the heavenly Father, He replies, "Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business," a foreboding, no doubt, for the first time touched her soul that this Son of hers was destined for greater things.

And when as a teacher of His people, He traveled from village to village, she seeks Him once more; in the company of His brothers she purposes to take Him home. The amount of confidence she places in Him is indicated by her words to the servants at the marriage of Cana, "Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it." According to John's record she continued in intimate associations with her Son, in a true maternal spirit concerning herself about his welfare.

And now she is to lose Him! But not by some grievous sickness. Then she could, at least have watched at His couch of suffering, assuaging His pains with tenderly, loving hands. As a criminal in the eyes of the world, she is called upon to witness His ignominious death; thus passes her innocent, beloved Son. How indescribably anguish-

stricken, forsaken and desolate must she have felt in a world which was robbing her of her all.

Jesus considers her agony. Without one word from her quivering lips, He reads her mind. Without petition from her, He allays it. Silver and gold He has none. His last possessions, His garments, the soldiers have divided among themselves. But He has for her something better: the true heart of a Son. On such an one He bids her recline at His own home-going. Seeing His mother and the disciple whom He loved near Himself, He is impelled to leave her a legacy of provident care. He consecrates the bond of two sympathetic souls, uniting them in kindred relation.

It might surprise us that the Lord bequeaths to Mary, already blessed with several sons, another one. Yet Mary needed a support which her other sons evidently did not afford her. Perhaps they were lacking in deep spiritual appreciation, and were therefore unable to understand her profound aspirations. To Mary this legacy of Jesus must have meant much, since, being accustomed to rely on her holy Son and to receiving His counsel, she could find in John alone a fitting substitute, because

he had the clearest insight into Christ's Spirit and Mary's spiritual needs.

The most beloved persons He had on earth Jesus unites. His mother continued to be surrounded by love. In a manner Christ leaves her; yet in the disciple whom He loved He Himself abides with her. The disciple who had lain on His bosom steps in His place.

> His mother He beheld with painful heart
> Sword-pierced her soul—her destined part—
> Therefore provides, when He is gone
> The love of John.

II.

"Behold, thy mother!" Thus Jesus directs John. To the favorite disciple He now entrusts His mother. She is in need of comfort. No dearer occupation henceforth will engage her time than to speak of her Son. And John is the one who has read the Master's heart most clearly. He is best fitted to take the Son's place. And John understands the suggestion of His Master. It is said, "From that hour the disciple took her into his own home." For twelve years to the time of her peaceful end, it is said by tradition, He lovingly provided for her.

We rejoice in this, that He who suffered for mankind on the Cross had yet a heart for the woe of the individual; that the fostering care for mother and disciple was not too small a matter for His concern when the redemption of the whole world lay upon His soul. It is a precious comfort to us, for we know that Jesus knows the needs and sorrows of the individual soul, so that for everyone of us He has words of solace. Pour out to Him your heart in all confidence. He will provide for you abundantly in all your special requests and your peculiar distress.

This Third Word from the Cross has an additional meaning. Luther says: "We must accept this word, though spoken to Mary and John separately, as a general commission for all Christian association; to the church as such that among ourselves we should be as mother and son, who love each other with all their heart, who help, who advise one with the other, whenever necessity arises. The Third Word from the Cross may be said to have a similar meaning to that other one of our beloved Lord, uttered repeatedly at the institution of the last Supper, 'A new commandment I give unto

you that ye love one another, even as I have loved you.' No deeper love is found on earth than that between mother and children. Here we have another new commandment from the cross to His own that they should love one another as members of one family."

"Behold, thy mother," said Jesus to the disciple whom He loved.

By this legacy from the Cross, through which a spiritual son was given to a lonely mother, many spiritual ties have since been consecrated. Alas! how rare the truly blissful unions on earth! And yet perfect communion is such a genuinely human need. Open your eyes and you will see a multitude of lonely people, embittered by the loss of their closest kin, grown shy and unsociable. If Christ on the Cross had power of knitting firm and intimate ties of communion, He is able to do so today. All you who complain of lack of communion place yourselves at the foot of the Cross with Mary and John; the man of sorrows knows how to allay your grief. If your heart yearns for compensation in the place of beloved ones to whom you might devote your life, the great Friend of the children appointed long

ago, perhaps, an orphaned child for you, orphaned parents, who longs for parental love. Open your home and your hearts to such an one.

The communion which blossoms at the foot of the cross of Christ far excels all merely natural bonds of family and friendship. Of a truth, the Lord knows how to make connections between those who are visited by like sorrows, like painful losses and like illnesses. They have met at the Cross of Christ, in the house of God, on God's acre, in the house of sorrow. In intimate understanding of each other's griefs they are united for confidence and comfort as were Mary and John. Holy love toward Jesus and longing for Him sanctify such relations of friendship. The cross of Christ has given birth to all those associations of charity and beneficence which have emulated the example of the loving Jesus. From their ranks have come the spiritual sons and daughters of the church.

Thanks to all souls like Mary's, endowed with Christian compassion for the poor, the sick, the forsaken, who often bore their crosses with impatience. You have pointed them to the Saviour of sinners, languishing on the cross.

To this day it is the glorified Saviour who, in the common celebration of the Lord's Supper, does away with the distinctions of calling, age, sex, so that communicants are made to feel that they are one great family of God, with a sense of sin common to all, with a common need of a Saviour, with one eternal goal.

And the most intimate ties of the family are touched in the Third Word from the Cross. Will you, son, who has outgrown the discipline of your parents, rise up against them, mock their admonitions, repay with ingratitude what they have done for you? Behold, your father, your mother; honor them that it may be well with you.

If sister and brother, although one by the bonds of blood, are tempted to contend, on account of their inheritance perchance, the Lord bids them listen: Behold your brother, your sister.

If some are bent on leaving the church, and shun her services, forget the sufferings of the poor, and the call of the needy causes in the household of faith, the Saviour calls to them from the cross: Behold, your congregation which I love and whose Head I am. If you wish to show forth the mind

of Christ, regard all men as your brothers and sisters. Should any one fear lest Christ fail to do for other Christians what he did for his mother, we point him to another utterance of His: "Whosoever doeth the will of my Father in Heaven, the same is my brother, sister, mother."—Amen.

The Fourth Word

THE FOURTH WORD FROM THE CROSS

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is, My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Matth. 27:46.

To the Cross we have often wended our way. Today we hear thence, cutting us to the quick, the heart-rending cry, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" This outcry comes from the lips of eternal Love. What depth of anguish in these words! Who can fathom them, or even divine their meaning? You have read how Luther meditated on this word for three days, without partaking of food or drink, how he delved into the very depths of it to waken on the third day as from a dream. He collected his thoughts, and, as if returning from a distant land, exclaimed: "Who can grasp it? God forsaken by God!" A shudder, indeed, it sends through one, this Fourth Word from the Cross, and simultaenously with this horor-stricken voice, there ensued above the cross an occurrence most mysterious. In the midst of midday brightness

utter darkness sets in. The heavens are enveloped in it. Night settles upon the world. The sun, the eye of the skies, is darkened. As if in pity, he spreads a veil over this intense agony of soul. The Saviour in apprehension!

Let us in this solemn hour consider—

1. This word, denoting the lowest stage of Christ's Passion, at the same time denotes His passing on to victory.

2. It is to be our strength in hours in which we feel as if we were forsaken by our God.

I.

To be forsaken—sad plight! You long for your beloved ones. Lo, you have to travel your path alone. You are lonely. You wish to pour out what oppresses your soul into the heart of a friend. You have no friend. All the joy of earth has lost its charm for you. Highest bliss is but half enjoyed unless its rays cast a reflection into the heart of another. Likewise are pain, mourning, sorrow doubly grievous if borne alone. Few words there are of as doleful a tenor as the word "forsaken."

Jesus had passed through stages of loneliness be-

fore. Sitting at the Last Supper, one of His disciples forsakes and betrays Him. When at Gethsemane prostrate on His countenance, He looks about for His disciples. They are sleeping. They perceive not His trial. He is forced to hail them, "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" He is forsaken. When the bailiffs lay hands on Him oh! how could His disciples flee? They did flee, though, and again it reverberates in the loving Master's soul: Forsaken! forsaken! All alone He treads His way to Golgotha. On this street of sorrow His physical strength gives way. He collapses under the weight of the cross. Again the plaint: Forsaken! And woe upon woe when He hangs upon the tree! Not, indeed alone, yet surrounded by scoffers and mockers. Forsaken! even though watched by a crowd of people.

Even Mary, His mother, and John, the disciple whom He loved, do not realize what in this bitter hour transpired in the recesses of the Master's heart. in the most faithful heart that ever beat. No one, indeed, understood Him in those moments. On that account He is forsaken, all alone, of a truth. Does He not own the Father concerning whom He wit-

nessed, "I and the Father are One?" No! Listen: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" To God the Father the question is addressed. This is the bitterest drop in His cup of sufferings, the lowest stage of His Passion. He feels that even the Father has forsaken Him, while the sin of the world is resting upon His shoulders. We understand our own forsaken condition. We know the dividing wall raised up between God and man. Whenever our sins grieve us, an oppressive sensation pervades our souls: forsaken by God!

In the case of Jesus, the sinless One, we are face to face with a mystery. How can He, the Pure, the Holy One, feel as if He were forsaken by God? Love only is able to interpret that sensation. We know the deep meaning of Christ's Passion. It was endured in our stead. Thus the sense of being forsaken by God cannot be anything alien and incomprehensible. Would it not be comprehensible to us all, when life departs, that we should feel forsaken by God, if all our sins, long since buried, should come forth? Like evil spirits, they rise up. Mountain high, there towers up guilt before our straining eyes. Indeed, we may well feel forsaken.

when God steps up to us with His eternal decree concerning ourselves.

Now, the Saviour realizes this depressing torture for our sakes. In our stead. He is not made merely to ponder on our misery; He *lives* it. You may be happy; yet if a dear friend is walking through the valley of distress, you forget your own good fortune, your family, all that has made your life so blissful. Thus ponder your Saviour's portion. "Although He did no sin, neither was there guile found in His mouth," yet in infinite Love, which He cherishes toward us, He sits down by your side, sympathizes with you for all that your heart endures; for all that horrifies and terrifies it. He wanted to feel with us all the misery which could possibly animate a human heart; for that reason He experienced even the agony of being forsaken by his God.

Now you may be perplexed on account of His "Why?" So then in that moment did He have no clear conception that He was to suffer in our stead? you may ask. Indeed not. This "why hast Thou forsaken me?" is merely the transition to that other Word, "It is finished." Being forsaken of God is

the last stage of His Passion. As in Gethsemane He prayed in one breath, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me"—and then, "yet not my will but Thine be done!" We must bring into connection this fourth Word from the Cross with the last one uttered.

He wrestled through, out of the depth to heights inconceivable. This Word is passing to His supreme victory. As one drowning in waves seizes the hand of the rescuer extended to him and holding fast to it, although sinking, never doubting his ultimate rescue, so the words, "My God, my God," are the two hands with which Jesus reaches out for the Father and is drawn out of the depth of His soul's distress. "My God, my God," these words imply: If Thou feignest to be hard-hearted, forsaking me apparently, I shall not let go of Thee. Thus Jesus conquered His God; thus He forced Him, as it were, to deliver Him from fear, judgment and abandonment, until at last He commended His Spirit into the Father's hands. This I call wrestling and conquering.

And now lastly the question: Why this agony of soul? Why this struggle? Why this victory in

bitterest passion? Why this condition of being forsaken by God?

II.

For you! For me! This is the motive to which the melody of Jesus' Passion is set. As the first Adam dragged us into his misery, so the second Adam atones on the Cross for the misdeeds of the first. As the first Adam put upon us the stamp of his sinful life, so the second Adam instills His blessed life of faith. "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." He was forsaken by the Father so that you, in the hour of abandonment, might struggle and conquer as He did.

Alas, the hours of being forsaken! They are not wanting in any Christian life. Have you not tasted this cup? If not, the shadows of night have not yet gathered over you.

"Forsaken!" Thus sighs yon mother, called upon to give up her little one, her pride, her treasure but recently bestowed. "Forsaken!" cries the husband who has surrendered his faithful wife, the sun of his home, to the messenger from eternity. Forsaken!" many a wife, who witnessed the passing of

the companion of her life, the father and provider of the children. Widows and orphans know the bitterness of being forsaken. It is an experience utterly unexplicable. "Why forsakest Thou me?" You cannot help asking of God at such a time: "Why hidest Thou Thy face from me?" These are sentiments altogether natural in the hour of desolation. If, then, we only learn to exclaim: "My God, Thou must continue to be my God; I shall not leave Thee; if it were not for Thee, there would nothing be left unto me."

If this be the keynote of our thoughts in the day of visitation, we will find His help to be near. A condition of utter loneliness the heart of man senses. when things occur as yonder on Calvary. The sky is darkened. Who knows them not—those moments of yearning inquiry, "Watchman, what of the night?" The man of Golgotha has realized more profoundly what it means to be forsaken of God than any mortal man. Jesus passed through all the possible experiences of your life that you might never forget to pray, "My God, my God, Thou art my God, my help in all distress."

He may, awhile still staying,
  His comfort keep from thee,
And, on His part delaying,
  Seem to have utterly
Forgotten and forsaken,
  And put thee out of mind,
Though thou'rt by grief o'ertaken,
  No time for thee to find.

But if thou never shrinkest,
  And true dost still remain,
He'll come when least thou thinkest,
  And set thee free again,
Thee from the load deliver,
  That burdeneth thy heart,
That thou hast carried never
  For any evil part.

Wait, only wait, distressed heart, and you will find who He is, the Saviour who, in compassion with thy pain and in His abandonment by His God, could exclaim, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

There is still another possibility of being forsaken of God. Many do not even know it, and yet, when in the midst of this affiction, do not know which way to turn. I mean, when the consciousness of sin, with its charges against the conscience, seizes the heart of man, when, as did Cain, the fratricide, he feels the oppressiveness of his guilt, the murderer in him laments. "My sin is greater

than that it could be forgiven me!" And this is the saddest experience of being forsaken of God. Man despairs of God. In this dilemma there is but one recourse: to cling to Christ by faith. Then you must call upon Him: "My God, I will not leave Thee. I hold fast Thy word. Thou hast promised, 'For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed, but my loving kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall my covenant of peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.' I attach myself to Thee. Thou darest not fail me."

And lastly we must consider the sense of being forsaken in the hour of death. Our Saviour was overcome by that sensation when He was compelled to tread alone the final path; when in His last hours He was surrounded by the terrors of judgment. When comes the end of our earthly journey; when all forsake us and no one is able to go with us; when, utterly left to ourselves, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we may, too, in agony of soul exclaim, "My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?" Yet no! Why did Christ thus cry? For our sakes; that we in our last moments, in our apparent loneliness, might be able to

look up to Him, and have our hope set upon Him. Since God for a brief span, which to the Son appeared like an eternity, forsook Him, He has nevermore forsaken us.

"When soul and body languish,
O leave me not alone,
But take away mine anguish,
By virtue of Thine own!"

All hail! the Saviour's cry, "My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me," shall carry me across the valley of death. By this I shall be strengthened, and with the dying Saviour proclaim, "It is finished, Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

Amen.

The Fifth Word

THE FIFTH WORD FROM THE CROSS

After this Jesus, knowing that all things are now finished, that the Scripture might be accomplished, saith, I thirst. John 19:28.

There are people who deny the Divinity of Christ. They regard Him as a noble man merely, imbued with the best of intentions and reaping ingratitude in return for his benevolent service, and at last paying all His high endeavors with an ignominious death. They class Him as on the same level with other able and excellent men, but do not give Him the preference before all others. There are those, too, who emphasize the Divinity in Christ exclusively, divesting His eminent personality of all human traits, as if in fear of robbing Him of His divine excellency.

The true Christian belief will ever recognize in Christ the Son of God *and* the Son of man, in whom dwelt divine fullness, who was aware of His Oneness with the Father, who, as certainly as He was true God, begotten from the Father in eternity, was also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. As the Mediator between God and man He is very near

to us, genuinely human. He knows all human needs from personal experience. A truly human need is manifested in His Fifth Word from the Cross, the confession of an extremely human sensation, *torturing thirst.*

"I Thirst."

Let us view—

1. The physical torture of the dying Redeemer.

2. The comfort resulting for us: "Him that thirsteth, let him come unto me and drink."

I.

The excruciating struggle of soul, covering these hours, had completely exhausted the Saviour. His strength was spent. The dim spark of life is near extinction. Limp and faint, with glazed eyes He hangs on the Cross, languishing for want of a refreshing draught. He knows that now He may beg for a drink of water. At the very beginning of His crucifixion the fearful torture of thirst had already troubled Him. When the potion of gall and myrrh was held up to His lips, He refused to drink. The service of charity intended by this draught, since it stupefied, thus mitigating the torments of cruci-

fixion, Jesus rejected. He wanted to die in perfect consciousness, thus emptying the cup of His Passion to the very dregs. In obedience to the Father, He suffered silently the pains of death, until in the last three hours these had reached their culmination, so that in the final moments He not only suffered the spiritual agony of one cast into hell, being forsaken of God, but, in addition to it, physical torture, the burning sensation of thirst, in which a drop of water gives refreshment indescribable, as is evidenced in the request of the rich man in hell (Luke 16:19ff). This was done that the saying might be fulfilled which, by way of prophecy, the twenty-second Psalm puts upon the lips of our blessed Lord: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax; it is melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws: and thou hast brought me into the dust of death" (Psalm 22: 14, 15).

Thus far His fearful martydom had not elicited from Him one sound denoting suffering or pain. As a patient lamb He would have continued to endure His thirst in silence. But that what is written in

Psalm 69: 21 "In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink," might be fulfilled, the Saviour exclaims, "I thirst." Says a faithful witness in amazement on account of such thirsting: "At that moment, I am sure, all the cooling springs which from rocky heights are wont to ripple down to the valley stopped in their course for a time, in order thereafter to gush down the more profusely into the depths, wailing loudly that they had been denied the privilege of assuaging the thirst of their Maker."

At the exclamation of the dying Jesus one of the soldiers held up to his lips a sponge saturated with vinegar, the customary beverage of humble folk. Yet not even this refreshing draught was to be without the ingredient of bitter *vermuth!* They mocked Him saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elias will come and help Him." Thus His last drink was embittered with the gall of scorn. In His physical weakness and helplessness the Saviour craves the mercy of man, and the mockery of His enemies evinces that all compassion, all pity within their hearts, has died out.

Of a humble maidservant it is said that one day, when offering a cooling drink to her sick Master,

she was struck so profoundly by his mentioning the sponge filled with vinegar at the cross as to cry out amidst her tears, "Woe unto me, ungrateful one! For so many years I have enjoyed God's blessings in this world, and never yet have I thought of that! Now I see that I have wasted my days without God!"

When in the agony of His struggle, there follows this exclamation of Jesus, "I thirst," this is not another climax in His Passion; we must rather view the hero who, after manly strife in which He fought, oblivious of hunger, thirst and open wounds, now, after the victory, becomes conscious that His wounds are bleeding; that now, when the tension ceases, the exhausted body yearns for a restorative, to think of which the grave seriousness of the gigantic struggle had hindered Him.

The confession of a physical need proves that the immense tension which, during the intense battle of soul had suppressed all other needs, has relaxed; it proves that the Saviour does not suppress the natural human need.

But we have a good right, too, to interpret this word of Jesus in a spiritual sense, namely, that

Jesus meant to say: "Just as my body, burning from mortal wounds and the heat of a scorching sun requires cooling refreshment in order to be able to utter the last two words needed by the sin-stricken world, thus thirsts far more profoundly my soul for the salvation of mankind. To seek their souls I came into the world, to save them I have entered the bitter hour of death. Jesus thirsts for our salvation. Those who continue in sin, who repudiate the grace offered them by Christ, still pass to Him the vinegar to drink. Alas! to this day we can hear the wailing cry of the Lord, "I thirst." We hear it from the lips of the poor and the wretched. For He says, "I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat; thirsty and ye gave me no drink." And asking Him, when we had omitted doing this, He replies: "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these, my brethren, even the least, ye did it not unto me."

Should not the Word of Christ from the Cross animate us to help and allay the needs and the misery of our fellowmen?

Shall we not repay the Lord with gratitude, who for the quenching of our soul-thirst dispenses the water of life eternal?

II.

Truly, His thirsting has no other motive than to quench our thirst. It is on this account that the thirsting One, languishing amidst the burning wounds of death on the Cross, hails us: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, from within him shall flow rivers of living waters!"

"I thirst," He waits, behold His body heave,
The parched tongue does to the palate cleave;
Drink living water from the spring of Life thou durst—
But He must thirst.

Legions there are who lend no ear to the call of the Spirit, who realize not the hunger and thirst of their souls, which, with an equal right as physical hunger and thirst, crave satisfaction.

As long as our Lord went about on earth, He did not feed every hungry one, whom He chanced to meet; He did not fill every want wherever and however He found it. The people, indeed, wanted such a Saviour, who would supply enjoyment and luxury, who would remove the care of life and the toil of labor. Such craving Jesus never satisfied. He ever and above all endeavored to arouse a long-

ing for grace, a true desire for help, an appreciation of His saving Love. Our generation will not find rest until the desire for salvation has grown to be the basis of all longing, until the zeal for the soul's salvation is the first motive, and until the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is the fundamental question of all humanity.

Hunger and thirst originate with an inward natural heat, which for the maintenance of life must have something to feed upon. The same law obtains in matters of faith. You cannot explain to people the inner emotions of your mind, such as joy, sadness, hatred, love, what about them, how they assert themselves. Neither can you describe in words the very nature of faith. You cannot tell me in so many words what constitute the inward needs of your soul, its hungering and thirsting. The ability to judge these is given to those only who to whom to believe has never been a hard matter, know them from a personal experience of trials and temptations. Little of this knows the individual who has not experienced spiritual hunger and thirst.

What is a precious, refreshing potion? In vain do we look for the spring whence it flows as clearly

as the crystal stream. It is pressed out of the fruit of the vine by a process of suffering. Yes, it must ferment, and thus must cast off all uncleanness. Likewise hunger and thirst are awakened only in such hearts as are pressed down, made contrite, and cleansed of the defilement of sin.

Jesus called those blessed who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Augustine was right in saying, "To be possessed by a longing for grace is the beginning of grace." True desire for grace, however, is intense and zealous. So a man parched with thirst not only pines for a cooling drink, but also seeks it, and gladly surrenders all to be refreshed. He is like a merchant in the desert who, when almost perishing from thirst, promises to sacrifice His whole fortune, which, in the form of precious stones, he carries with him in the caravan.

Thus the sincere, penitent Christian longs for the fountain of grace divine, saying: "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee. My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever" (Psalm 73: 25, 26).

If the world often offers gall for the refreshing

cup and the potion of joy; if the pleasures of life are embittered by harsh misfortune, painful loss, bitter experience, oppressive toil; if a wound never healing be inflicted, burning severely, causing entreaties for deliverance from all earthly trial to rise from the bottom of our heart—may then a view of the suffering Saviour rise before our eyes, and may His lips, which for our sakes uttered the cry, "I thirst," give the satisfying answer to our longing!

Lord, I thirst! For Thee I wait,
  Clam'ring for eternal ease;
Lead me through the pearly gate
  Out of strife to blessed peace!

Amen.

The Sixth Word

THE SIXTH WORD FROM THE CROSS

"It Is Finished."

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished; and He bowed His head, and gave up His Spirit. John 19:30.

A silent hill to which in spirit thousands wander day by day! What strange, sorrowful picture breaks on our light? It is the place of a skull.

Its tree-bare summit faileth
To show the mountain's pride;
The tow'ring oak, which scaleth
Though storm-tossed heaven's height.
Yet all the cedars royal
Which Hermon's height once saw—
They bow their crowns most loyal
To the tree of Golgotha.

No crystal brooklet glitters
With gleam o'er mossy rill,
Nor flow majestic rivers
From yonder height so still.
Yet from the cross abounding
There flows—O learn with awe—
Eternal life's free fountain:
The Blood of Golgotha.

Belief in the cleansing blood of Christ, it is true, proves infinitely difficult to many souls in our day. They cannot understand how that death at Jeru-

salem almost 1900 years ago should possess value for the men and women of other tongues and nations of a later time. And yet it is a marvelous power, attracting and drawing men towards Golgotha, where the infinite sacrifice for the sin-smitten world was offered. As long as there are longing souls among the children of men, they will feed on this sacrifice. This is what exalts the Christian faith above all other religions: it can preach a real redemption. Christianity today sees but one Cross on Calvary's hill, the Cross of our Lord, whence peace is derived. Ever and again hear we gladly the Seven Words from the Cross. Today we shall meditate on the sixth of these wonderful words, "It is finished." What does it teach us?

1. This I did for thee.
2. What doest thou do for Me?

I.

Christ's Cross, the very cross of Good Friday—we conceive of it properly only if we have made it the incentive of our decision for life and death. At the foot of the Cross of Calvary our faith either suffers shipwreck or casts anchor. It proclaims the

Son of God from eternity, who made Himself of no reputation and took upon Himself the most ignominious death out of pure love for fallen man, in order to reconcile him with Father.

Lo, all the pomp of earth, it vanished when I saw
That noble countenance upon the Cross of Golgotha.

Three crosses erected in the same place, tools of like pain, ordered by the same judge; yet what different messages they preach! The cross at the left and the cross at the right of Jesus' Cross, both preach that the cross in the center marks the pivotal point. It forces decision. It is either an offence and stumbling-block, or a power unto life and salvation.

Beating upon the breast and turning about, as did the people witnessing the ordeal, with a foreboding of their own destiny, their own guilt, does not suffice for a proper interpretation of the preaching of the Cross.

The Cross of Christ preaches, "God so loved the world that He spared not His own Son, but gave Him freely for us all; shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" It hails us with words like these: "Come ye, and let this cross be the com-

fort of your heart, your life's firm foundation. It proclaims the great life-text, 'through the cross to the crown,' through affliction into the Kingdom of God." Hold fast this Love, even though the world cast you off; die unto the world; crucify the world with its lust and evil desires. The Cross teaches us to pray, "Christ, Thou Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us!"

By Christ's death the power of sin has been broken. By this death He has brought about the possibility of a world absolved from sin. His bitter death allows us to look most deeply into the riches of His inner life. To His last breath every new stage of His Passion is but an amazing revelation and evidence of the hidden fullness of God. From the languid lips of the Crucified One there flow words of most sacred love, of the tenderest care, of mercy most benign, of the most enduring resignation; immortal words which continue to ring throughout the centuries.

How confident of victory sounds forth His Word from the Cross, "It is finished." A holy life is finished in holiness; an incomparable ministry is terminated in a manner incomparable; in its extinction

even the light of the world illumines the darkness of death with rays most wonderful. Our mourning for Him must give room to reverend admiration, to confident belief in the eternal glory of Christ. God had made *Him* who knew no sin to be sin for us. God by the blood of the only-begotten Son is reconciled with humanity which had forsaken Him. It is, as says the writer of Acts, God's own blood by which He purchased the church.

Christ, however, wants His death to be regarded as the passing through to His sublimest perfection. His contemporaries in general were held by ideas most wordly with regard to the character of the Messiah. Therefore they were confused and bewildered by the shameful death of Jesus. They could not, as we do, see it with eyes made keen by the subsequent events. But if now a dying malefactor addresses the companion in death with the petition, "Lord, remember me when Thou comest in Thy Kingdom," how can we, having heard the message of the Risen One, look up to the Cross without viewing it as the background of the Kingdom established; how can we, in the Word of the dying Saviour, "It is finished," perceive only the

painful exclamation of physical life ebbing out, and not much more clearly and emphatically behold the triumph of the new and glorified life? If now our faith has raised itself to the new life of the conqueror over death, we may confidently apply to Him the word of Holy Writ, that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which is to be revealed in us. His sufferings vanish in view of the glory which is revealed beyond His Passion.

II.

What further message does this Word from the Cross, "It is finished," convey to our hearts? Christ has atoned for our guilt on the Cross. The Saviour, with this word indicating the consummation of His redemptive work, says to us, "This I did for thee." At the same time He puts the question, "What doest thou for Me?"

Many things, indeed, have we not done for Him; many things have we done against Him.

Let us be honest with ourselves. Let us take a retrospect of our past lives. Of all the woe that ever befell us, which was the most acute? Of all

the bitter hours we have passed, which are still the most bitter? Are they not those in which judgment on account of the repudiated Christ, the Christ whom we denied, betrayed, despised, crucified anew, visited us? How many such hours, in which sin became our destruction, rise up before our memory?

"Follow Me," says the Christ. Are we really His followers? Can He perfect the good work in us which He has begun? Are we able with a good conscience to repeat after Him the great word, "It is finished?" Not even the greatest artist can say that of his handiwork. There *is* in fact no perfect human accomplishment, even though only the material of a product of art, the colors, the canvas, the stone, the marble had been corroded, disintegrated by the tooth of time. But as in plastic art the ancient Greeks have produced masterpieces unattained hitherto so that all modern sculptors still pattern after the old masters, so have we an ideal so perfect, so unequalled in Christ Jesus, Who knew the true art of living and accomplished the highest, who denied Himself, and for the sins of all mankind gave His Life a sin-offering.

For His Passion Christ applied the word "cross," an unusual term to the thinking mind of the Jew. With the crucifixion of Christ on Golgotha all Christian suffering has been defined as "our cross." The wordly-minded now weeps tears when his children do not turn out well. That is no cross, however. The weight of a cross in the training of your children, Christian father and mother, you realize bearing down on you, only because your conscience accuses you of the things left undone in the bringing them up, and because by a poor example you have failed so sadly.

They that follow Christ crucify their flesh with the passions and lusts thereof; they deny themselves. As long as there is something to be denied in ourselves and in our surroundings, we probably are inclined to give up. Whenever it becomes a matter of our very selves; when our work is declared insufficient by the declaration of Golgotha, "It is finished," when our will is broken in the prayer, "Thy will be done," then we realize the true nature and meaning of self-denial, namely, the crucifixion of our entire old nature. A Paul even is constrained to complain, "To will is present with me;

but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom. 7:18). It is ordained for our good that sin bears bitter fruit. As long as there is time, God purposes the more to draw us away from all evil in order that in the day of judgment the good work, which He has begun in us, may not remain undone. Let us do the good while it is day. Let us think daily of the betterment of our lives, and in the realization that by our own strength we cannot be saved, turn to Jesus with this prayer, "Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us!"—Amen.

The Seventh Word

THE SEVENTH WORD FROM THE CROSS

Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit. Luke 23:46.

Today our eyes are directed towards Golgotha in profound devotion. The mystery of death bids us be silent. Jesus dies. The only sinless one among the millions of men on earth pays His tribute to the "king of terrors." Death is the wages of sin, and since the sinless one takes upon Himself the sins of mankind, He must accept also the *wages* of sin; He must die. And He dies most willingly. "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit," He exclaims.

Let us view—

Death in the Light of Eternity.

1. As the end of life.
2. As the opening up of eternity.

I.

Death is, indeed, the end of the present life. All sprightly brooks flowing as in rapture, all rivulets so tearful, empty into the sea of death, yea, into

the dead sea with its waters so black. No countryside abounding with flowers by its shores gladdens the eye; black clouds overhang its desolate plains blighted with desolation.

Should man share this destiny? It were sad beyond imagination if man's life should terminate with his brief earthly existence. How should we endure the hardships of our pilgrimage, if no manna were dispensed as food from heaven? The very toils of life must produce within us a longing for a better existence. Or should all our aspirations and all our hopes end in death? Should there be an end to all love and friendship forever? Will all the bonds formed here below be forever severed? Indeed not! We cannot accept so dismal a view.

Our years on earth are soon spent, and as on wings we speed to eternity. The life still before us may seem long, to be sure, but when it ebbs away, we deplore its brevity. With swelling sails and with lofty purpose, youth launches out on the high sea of life. The other shore seems far away, an immeasurable distance; yet swiftly the ship of life cuts through the billows, and silently in a weather-beaten craft old age seeks the port.

But no! One law applies to man and another to the flower of the field. The flower blooms and soon withers, and from its dust there rises a new flower in springtime, endued with like brilliancy of color. In like form as its predecessor it delights the human eye. Man, however, lives but once in this world. No two alike rise from the dust. Every man has his own personality and his own characteristics. If from the mother's bosom the beloved child is taken, a thousand other children cannot replace her own. We mortals, singular creatures as we are, cannot forever, body and soul, be given to annihilation. If "here we have no continuing city," it follows logically that we are not ultimately intended for this visible world; it cannot be the final home of the soul. He who here below finds his only homestead, wanders and strays as in a fog. We know of a better and a loftier home, for the sake of which we are to lay aside this body of flesh and blood in order to gain that better abiding place.

Yet not solely on account of the toils and the transitoriness of this earthly existence, but also by virtue of a blessed prevision, which is innate in our souls, and which by means of the Christian

spirit grows clearer and more vivid, we are led to realize that here below we must not seek the continuing city.

A home-sickness unappeased we all carry within our souls, the as yet indistinct idea of a paradise, a place of perfect peace. To *describe* it we are unable, because we do not as yet know it from experience. We will perceive its true nature only when at last we have found it, as "the lover at first sight of his ideal suddenly," as the poet puts it, "feels his wandering wavering longing in bonds."

Yet for the very reaon that, so far, we have nowhere found this dwelling-place of peace, we know that as yet we are not at the goal and in a position to halt. "It is appointed unto man once to die;" his life must end in death. The flower knows not that it lives, knows not that it will soon be blighted. Man, however, knows, as surely as he knows anything, that he must die, and yet shall live eternally. In plain writing it is inscribed into his heart, and all the chisels of doubt cannot cut away the writing; it may be whitewashed over, yet the writing cannot be concealed. How can we believe that there is an end of man in death? O no, there lives in our soul

a vivid hope and a profound inner desire for self-conscious existence in the great beyond. We know it must be so: the soul will continue to live, and some day will be united with its Creator, and will dwell forever in blissful fellowship with Him.

II.

No! no: death is not to be regarded as the end of life, but rather as the opening up of the gateway of eternity.

Look to the cross on which Jesus is suspended. His last Word, too, he takes from the Old Testament. The moment had arrived in which He was to give up His earthly life, dying with the Scriptures on His holy lips even as He died according to the Scriptures. Must He not be about His Father's business even in this hour? Is not His Word filled with hope most blessed? He knows that His Spirit will rest securely in His Father's hands. Often He had used the affectionate appellative, "Father." "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who hath given them unto me, is greater than all; and no one shall be able to snatch them

out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one." To his own He gives the blessed promise: "In my Father's house are many mansions; I go to prepare a place for you."

In the garden of Gethsemane He sighs, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." On the Cross He exclaims, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." So it is the Father's Name He invokes in His last Word from the Cross.

Blessed assurance—to have a Father in heaven! With hearts at ease we are now enabled to stand by the graves of our loved ones. We know them to be in our Father's care.

Ask the dying one whether he does not bear in his bosom the hope for a life beyond the grave.

Its luminous heights reach far above spheres of this world. When our journey through this vale of sorrows has come to and end, when we have laid aside the tent of this body, the spirit returns to God who gave it. Yet they only, who have accepted Jesus as their Saviour, who have here below fought the good fight and have conquered, who have been faithful unto death, will at last enter the dwellings

of peace. Strife and victory must be consummated ere the reward and glory can ensue.

The eternal city is established of a surety, for God has said, "My people shall abide in a peaceable habitation, and in safe dwellings, and in quiet resting-places." It will be a *continuing city*, too. The bliss of its inhabitants will endure forever; it will be unchangeable. Not as if there could be no growth of eternal blessedness, but in so far as it will see no change and transition to suffering. Over there we shall hear no lamentation, for the place is filled with joy unspeakable. Celestial music will be heard in the heavenly Canaan, in the good land where our soul shall dwell and rest eternally. There, too, we shall see Christ face to face at the right hand of God. He will surround us with the splendor of His glory, and we shall abide with Him forever. And you will meet your loved ones gone before. Wait, then, and be not dismayed. After a brief span of time, you shall rest forever in the Lord.

But how are we to seek the coming things in the present? Can one seek anything in haphazard manner? No. You can properly seek only that of which you have knowledge. The Kingdom of

heaven is a given quantity; it is at hand. The eternal has been manifested in the temporal in order to build a bridge from this side to yonder shore. In Christ the future world has been made manifest. We must not allow this spiritual, inborn impulse to be stunted and choked by the weeds of the sensual nature. Weeds easily overrun the good seed on the soil of the heart. We must nurse it carefully that it may grow and bring forth fruit a hundredfold. For we have a sure goal upon which we must fix our eyes.

We must work quietly. We must keep steadily on the straight path, permit no straying, be it never so alluring. And if we should err, we must return in season in order to reach the goal, cleansed in our hearts, well prepared for the heavenly calling. The path is not always smooth; indeed, it is rough and arduous for the greater part of the way; it is not easily found. At many cross-roads we arrive and stand perplexed. How are we to know the right way? There is a safe guide, Christ Jesus, who has entered eternal glory to prepare a place for us.

To Him we must surrender unreservedly, follow Him unhesitatingly, and obediently observe His

new commandment of love. He will lead us safely upon the narrow path. In Him, too, all questions of life which trouble our hearts solve themselves. We must look for a solid staff on which to lean when we are weary, the strength of which must be thoroughly tested. Such a support, above all, is the Word of God, our Bible. The path to the goal is a godly walk in integrity, endowed with Christian virtues. For *the way to heaven* leads through the realm of piety, and on it no willful sinners walks, as says Isaiah, the prophet. Contaminate your soul with the love of the world and sin, and you walk not on this highway, but rather on the broadway which leads to perdition. The pure in heart only shall see God.

As at the dawn of the morning the sunlight glows in dim purple at first, growing brighter as the hour advances, so it is with the path of the righteous. They progress in that which is good; their purity shines more and more brightly. The wicked, on the other hand, do not come to the light, for their works are evil. Let us endeavor, therefore, to lead pure lives.

A pagan philosopher, wise old Plato, says: "I

ponder as to how I may sometime present my soul to the judge in sanest condition. I will, in seeking the truth, attempt to live as well as I can, and thus also die, when the hour of death shall arrive. And I advise all other men, as far as lies in my power, and you especially, to lead such a life and fight valiantly." Truly this pagan philosopher had the right idea. He was on the right track as far as the human mind, unaided by Holy Scripture, is able to discern. Should we not be able to emulate him, we who, in Christ Jesus, have access to the inexhaustible fountain of all life?

But we must also watch and pray lest we enter into temptation; watch over ourselves and our souls, guard against all dangers to virtue and salvation and against the incitements to sin. Again and again we must examine ourselves whether or not we are on the right path to the city of God.

We must pray without ceasing. Prayer is the spiritual weapon supplied by Jesus Himself, the solid armor on which glance off the fiery darts of Satan. Whenever we gather for prayer, be it at the beginning or at the close of our daily tasks, be it at the daily meal, in the closet or in the house

of God with the worshipping congregation, our heart is lifted above time and transitoriness; our thoughts climb the ladder of Bethel to the throne of the Heavenly Father. Though brought back again to the noisy din of every day routine, we cannot sink; we feel safely established, the anchor of hope being firmly embedded in Christ Jesus.

Our heavenly home also, like the lighthouse by the shore, will light up the path of safety. This hope will also help us to endure the burdens of life. No earthly need will any longer drag us down to the dust.

Above all, we know that here we have no continuing city but seek one to come. To the weary pilgrim it matters little whether he find a shelter more or less comfortable. He is comforted with the prospect of the pleasant home in which he is to rest from all toil. Let us be comforted in our afflictions. Ere we know we shall be at the end of our journey. Soon we will lay down the heavy load, and though death, the only friend of the unfortunate, for a while deceive the eye of the weary wanderer, a time *is* coming when we shall rest on

God's bosom and ponder over bygone trouble with delight. A crown unfading will adorn our brow.

Praise, therefore, the eternal love of God the Father, which in another world has set aside a home so promising and everlasting. Yet let us also be warned that there is a place of eternal retribution if we fail to accept Christ and refuse to follow Him in purity of life. One place or the other will be our portion, according to the deeds done in the body, whether they be good or evil.

Consider the brevity of this earthly pilgrimage, and be prepared by a firm faith, holy walk and a godly life to be found blameless before the judgment-seat of Christ, so that the end of life's journey may be the open doorway into your heavenly home.

I know what in eternity awaits me, and therefore
I do not disavow that for a better land
A longing which has risen up of yore
To join the host redeemed, the blissful band;
That often I have sought if not the wing
Could be unfolded thither me to bring.—Amen.

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